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OPPORTUNITIES IN HISTORICAL FICTION¹

The definition of historical fiction is like many other branches of the subject, a matter of dispute and uncertainty. There are those who would class as historical fiction novels and short tales void of all trustworthy historical knowledge, or authentic characters of the period depicted, or real events, simply because the fiction in question, while purely imaginary, or fanciful, has its time and scenes placed in some more or less remote period of the past. There are great novels such as Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter," and many well-known and popular romances, such, for example, as Maurice Hewlett's "Forest Lovers," which belong to this psychological or atmospheric school of historical fiction, and one of the world's greatest masterpieces, "Don Quixote," could also be included in this category if such a wide latitude of definition is allowable. For these books certainly do succeed in evoking the soul of the period of which they treat. They recreate the legendary and mythical atmosphere which scientific history neglects, and which is also neglected, I believe to its loss, by the fiction which grows out of science rather than from the subsoil of legends, myths, and traditions which underlie and overbrood the exterior facts of history. A juster, or at any rate, a more material and firmer definition of the historical novel, is put forward by Mr. Jonathan Nield in his *Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales* as follows:—"A novel is rendered *historical* by the introduction of dates, personages, or events, to which identification can be readily given." This is a good definition, for handy, work-a-day purposes. Nevertheless, I think it will always remain true, as it was true in the case of Walter Scott, that the folklore, and traditions, and even the fables and superstitions, of a people are as important as the verifiable facts of its political, economic or military history. Facts of course are fundamentally important; even for a romantic novelist they form the indispensable basis of his work, its bony structure so to speak, but for the novelist facts are not enough. Fable and fantasy, and legend and tradition—legends ranging from those true facts which ordinarily do not get themselves recorded, at

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least by secular historians—miracles, for example—to the wildest and most baseless superstitions, are mingled and intermingled with material facts in the chronicles of all peoples born later than yesterday. It is indeed a laudable and necessary employment for the properly qualified experts to disengage the facts from the fantasies—but such pundits should not complain if few besides themselves turn zestfully to feed human hearts that long for the quickening things of life upon cold slabs of meticulously certified records. For the facts of history do not thrive, do not live and move and possess vital being, when cut off from their roots in the rich soil of human passions and placed away from the vitalizing sunshine of the spiritual motives which often move them and explain them. They are then like dried-up, withered, colorless, odorless flowers, stiffly glued upon cards by botanists, very useful to students, but repellant to others.

Truth is not merely a matter of fact. Truth is the spirit which underlies all appearances and materializes in facts and deeds; truth is a hidden and spiritual force and facts are only modes of its operations; the outward signs which express the inward life; sacramental when employed in the service of revealed truth, but often very misleading when arranged by one who is blind or hostile to the truth. A characteristic legend, or tradition, or myth concerning a city, or a man or a woman, when rightly interpreted, will often express more truth than will barrels and bales of statistical facts. Facts, I repeat, are as the bones, sinews, and veins, of the body of history, and of the fiction which derives from history; while legends and traditions mingle their influences in its blood, and in its soul, giving color and expression and bloom and beauty to its features. Only one kind of fable, I make bold to maintain, is deleterious—that which is a lie, or the child of a lie, the wilful invention of malice; all slanders and scandal and evil falsifications—these are the cancers of history, and when transmitted to fiction they convey their daily contagions from soul to soul.

Because of the presence of unverifiable, or starkly false elements in historical fiction, and because too of fiction's admitted power to extend its influences far beyond those of formal history, there have always been powerful critics and teachers who have altogether condemned historical fiction and fought against

its cult. Sir Leslie Stephen, in England, is one of the most formidable critics with whom the lover of historical romance has to deal. Prof. Brander Matthews, in America, is a representative of the same school of criticism which believes that historical romance is a false art and a detriment to the interests of true history. I shall, however, make no effort to debate the subject here. For I believe the consensus of worthwhile opinion is heavily against this school. The historical novel, as Mr. Nield truly says, exists primarily as fiction, and the primary function of fiction, is, after all, to entertain, though secondarily it may and does instruct or edify. It also, it is true, like all other types of fiction, when it is false or vicious, may corrupt and falsify; but you cannot condemn all novels because of the evil ones any more than you can condemn all histories because some are misleading, or constructed in the interests of a particular propaganda. As Carlyle said in his review of the Waverly novels, giving them praise which covers all other good examples of the art: "These historical novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies, and abstractions of men." In other words, good historical fiction does what Charles Reade declares to be its mission, namely: it interprets the puzzles and mysteries of history, it interprets the human nature and the spiritual interests hidden behind the records of the past; it reveals the continuity of the ideals and the aspirations, the struggles and the arrows of humanity.

I must not forget, however, that I am speaking to historians, to teachers, writers and students of history, and that I speak first of all as a fictionist, not as an historian. You will for this reason expect from me, I am sure, something more definite than a few general ideas, especially at such a meeting as this, when you have gathered together to consider the very important interests of your great science. You will probably agree that fiction writers profit extensively by your labors; and you may take for granted the fact that those who are neither historians, nor students of history, namely the general reading public, derive from the work of the novelists a great deal of entertainment, and

possibly some rather vague historical information; but still you may be inclined to ask: "Well, yes, but what of it? What do *we* gain, and why should *we* be interested in the opportunities which history affords for the novelist?"

I believe the question to be a pertinent one. I also believe that at the present time it is a most practical question, and I furthermore hold that history as well as the art of fiction would gain greatly, and would promote its own mission more effectually, if its practitioners would promote rather than be indifferent to the opportunities which many fertile fields of American history offer to the novelist. I would not wish to appear as a dull fellow, a bore at a party, but I must risk being taken for such a one by declaring that it is a woeful waste of time for men and women to do anything, or to plan anything, related to education, or politics, or even that more detached employment of humanity which we term Art, except what they do or what they plan directly or indirectly contributes to the solution of the supreme social problems of the vast, world-wide, social crisis of today.

It is unnecessary, I think, even to list the leading ones of these multitudinous problems. We all know them, we are all unescapably aware of them. It is, I think, not too much to say that every possible trouble, calamity, woe; every world problem, international problem, national, state or civic problem, which history has ever recorded in the past, press all together, with the utmost confusion, upon us today. I think it is also safe to say that none of these problems can be settled, in a final sense, unless all are settled. In other words, I am one of the many who must perforce believe that society is standing at one of its major turning points. We are at the end, or almost at the end of an epoch, at the end of a universal social system; but what the character of the new epoch is to be, what the new social system is to be, baffles all conjecture. Even if this view is extreme, and therefore erroneous, it is still quite obvious that society everywhere, if not confronting the death of the present system of life and the convulsive birth-throes of a new system, is at any rate perplexed and almost overwhelmed with a pressure of problems. It is therefore obvious that the science of history, and that branch of the art of fiction which draws its material from his-

tory, being among the great factors which move civilized men, have great parts to play in the social crisis. I also believe that there is a close connection between these two forces, the science of history and the art of fiction, and that this connection can be deliberately encouraged and fostered to the consequent benefit of society.

One of the most palpable results of the World War is the increased power and interest which two great and apparently conflicting ideas have come to possess for men and women all over the world. I refer to the idea and ideal of internationalism, of a world state, on the one hand, and of the idea and ideal of nationalism on the other. Time lacks for even the most sketchy examination of these two tremendous forces; but we know without stopping for such an examination how vast is the struggle and how momentous will be the consequences of either a complete victory of one or the other, or even of a partial victory, dividing the earth and its possessions and peoples between the camps of the internationalists and the nationalists. All over the world small and submerged peoples are arising, claiming and in some instances gaining national recognition and national functions. Throughout the world, at the same, there sweeps the subtle yet mighty influence of the spirit which seeks to win the minds and the hearts of men to the new ideal of the world state, of united humanity. Coincident with this titanic and worldwide struggle go many other subsidiary conflicts of principles and of ideas. Supposing internationalism triumphs—How then should men conduct their affairs? There are those who dream of the universal republic. There are those who say: "Let us retain, so far as is possible, the existing systems and structures of the various nations and peoples, but let the mall concur in a world league, or superstate, or court of international arbitrament." There are others who say: "Let us sweep away every vestige of the capitalistic systems, root and branch, and let the whole world be one community." There are on the other hand those who say: "The democratic dream is a vast illusion; the present state of the world is a proof; let us therefore return to Monarchy—or to the rule of an intellectual Aristocracy—or to that of a benovelent Despotism." Almost infinite, indeed, are the battle cries and the conflicting formulas.

History, if it cannot absolutely solve these problems, can at any rate most fruitfully contribute to their solution by witnessing, in the court of public opinion, or in the perhaps higher and more influential court of scholarship, to the social experiments, struggles, crisis and solutions of the past;—of the remotest past down to the day before yesterday, or yesterday itself; for the mind of man seems to be absent-minded, and habitually forgetful—especially, I would say the modern mind, which for the most part feeds itself with the vile hash of gossip, and scandal, and fragmentary and disjointed reports of the daily press, being cut off from the sustenance provided for it in older days by the traditions and stories handed down orally, and not making up for this deficiency by reading the books that really matter. Undoubtedly, a heightened appreciation of the practical social utility of history is one of the new notes of our times. The problem of how to extend this appreciation and how to increase the practical utility of history, is a vital one, and it directly connects with my particular subject, namely, the opportunities of historical fiction.

A very great instance of the power of historical fiction to change the current of a nation's thought and thereby to bring about new and vital changes in society, is to be found in the case of Walter Scott and the revival of Catholicism in England. The Rev. W. H. Kent, O.S.C., contributed an article on this subject of Walter Scott and the Catholic revival to the *Catholic World* November, 1914. I am taking a rather long extract from his article because it sums up so well and so vividly illustrates the point I am trying to make:—

After his own realm of romance, it is in the field of historical studies that the influence of Scott has had the most conspicuous and far-reaching effect. And if it were possible to eliminate from this branch of English literature everything that owes its origin, directly or indirectly, to the Waverly novels, a large mass of meritorious works would disappear altogether, and many others would be notably diminished or changed in character and contents.

Here it may be well to add that while later English and Scottish historical literature owes much to this master of romance, more recent research in this field has enabled the critics to detect not a few mistakes or inaccuracies in his vivid pictures of the

past. To some this might seem to diminish, if not to destroy, the historical value of his stories. But while it is well to have these mistakes of the novelist and of earlier histories set right by the more exact methods now in use, our scientific historians in their turn may still have something to learn from Scott's moving romances. And if he sometimes falls short of the accuracy in detail demanded by critical science, in point of impartiality he is, on the other hand, superior to not a few professional historians. For these writers, in spite of their desire to be accurate and scientific, are too often biassed, however unconsciously, by their historical theories and religious beliefs or political opinions. Hence, their pictures of men with whom they are in sympathy are real and true, while the figures of their opponents are fictitious or distorted. But the true artist has no use for monstrosities and abstractions. And the truth of art saves the truth of history.

We have a notable example of this in *Old Mortality*, which deals with a stormy period of civil strife and religious fanaticism and persecution, where an historian can scarcely escape doing some injustice to one side or the other. Moved by his own sympathies, he is only too likely to enlarge on the crimes and cruelty of his enemies, and extenuate the offences of his friends. He is thus, in too many cases, an artist in black and white, or in Ruskin's forcible phrase, 'in lampblack and lightning.' Thus the great Whig historian of this period leaves us with the impression that the followers of Claverhouse were monsters of iniquity, while their Cameronian victims were like sheep in the fangs of ravening wolves. Tory critics, on the other hand, leave us with the belief that fanatical crime and cruelty was punished with righteous severity. But the picture painted by the master of romance leaves a more impartial impression. For the reader can recognize a true nobility of character in both the contending parties, sympathizes in turn with the wrongs endured by the victims on both sides. In this respect this vivid masterpiece of romance might well serve as a pattern for historians.

This historical quality of Sir Walter's work should have a special interest for Catholic readers, for it was by this power of painting a faithful and impartial picture of the past that he was enabled to play an important part in the great religious revival, and though no such result was foreseen or desired by him, his writings were, however indirectly, the means of bringing many thousands of his fellow-citizens into the Catholic fold. Some readers may wonder how this can be true of books by one who lived and died a Protestant, and was by no means free from a

traditional prejudice against Popery. But the statement can present no difficulty to those who are familiar with the obvious historical and causal connection between the Romantic movement in art and letters and the Catholic Revival. No one who has studied this story, can doubt that the influence of the literary and artistic movement on the religious renaissance, was as real as the influence of Voltaire and Rousseau on the men of the Revolution. As a general rule, the historical effect wrought by books is only rightly appreciated in later years. But in the case of Walter Scott, the influence of his works on the religious movement was felt and frankly acknowledged at the time by the great Oxford leader.

On this point it may be of interest to cite the testimony of Cardinal Newman in a paper originally published in an Anglican review, and subsequently reprinted in the first volume of his *Essays Critical and Historical*. In this paper on the *Prospects* of the Anglican Church, Newman is reviewing the various causes which contributed to the remarkable revival of Catholic doctrines and principles in England, and the surprising success of the movement then in progress. And this is what he has to say on the part played by the romantic writings of Sir Walter Scott:

During the first quarter of this century a great poet was raised up in the North, who, whatever were his defects, has contributed, by his works in prose and verse, to prepare men for some closer and more practical approximation to Catholic truth. The general need of something deeper and more attractive than what had offered itself elsewhere, may be considered to have led to his popularity; and by means of his popularity he re-acted on his readers, stimulating their mental thirst, feeding their hopes, setting before them visions which, when once seen, are not easily forgotten, and silently indoctrinating them with nobler ideas, which might afterwards be appealed to as first principles. Doubtless there are things in the poems and romances in question of which a correct judgment is forced to disapprove; and which must be ever a matter of regret; but contrasted with the popular writers of the last century, with its novelists, and some of its most admired poets, as Pope, they stand almost as oracles of Truth confronting the ministers of error and sin.

For a Catholic, of course, it is much more important that a historical novel, or any other piece of art, should contribute to the better understanding and the actual spread of the Faith than that it should be an agency for the diffusion of secular historical knowledge, or of secular entertainment. And as a Catholic must also necessarily believe that his faith, when correctly applied through practical channels of action, is the only possible solution and explanation at once of the world problem, it is, therefore, of double importance that Catholic novelists, or non-Catholic novelists of the temper of Scott, should arise to avail themselves of the teeming opportunities which the rich and almost untilled fields of American history offer to them. Think, for example, of the marvelous opportunities that Catholic Maryland presents to a novelist capable of handling that mighty subject—a subject which is united with the innermost soul of the American nation because of the idea of religious liberty implanted in our Western World by Calvert and his followers. Think also of the romantic and tragic story of California and its missions; of the great Southwest and its heroic priests, explorers and missionaries, of the Mississippi Valley and the marvelous story of the Jesuits and Recollects and French Cavaliers and traders whose trail extended from Hudson's Bay in the North to the Gulf of Mexico in the South. But quite aside from this, to a Catholic, fundamentally important mission of the historical novelist, and looking at the subject purely from a secular citizen's point of view, how many are the wonderful stories connected with the birth and progress of the nation which cry aloud for treatment by the poet and the historical fictionist! How effectively such stories would help in spreading that proper pride of nationality and justifiable patriotism which are nourished with the traditions and the knowledge of a country's past! How valuable the extension of this atmosphere of historical knowledge and romance would be today in welding the scattered and at times conflicting groups of our population together in a common consciousness of American struggle, American ideals, American achievements, and of America itself.

Yet at this very point we must pause to recognize a danger—a danger that is increased by the very fact that we are becoming conscious of our historical opportunities, and are taking

steps to realize these opportunities. The danger is that a too deliberate or propagandist attitude toward these opportunities will defeat the very purpose we have in mind.

In other words, the deliberate effort to "put over"—if I may use an effective bit of the vernacular—historical or religious propaganda, through the form of a novel, is almost certain to be a failure. I think this is true, on the whole, although there are notable exceptions to any such general rule—for example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Wiseman's *Fabiola* and others. Yet even the work of such a successful propagandist as Msgr. Benson lacks, in my judgment, lasting artistic quality. If we should encourage the writing of historical novels by the offer of prizes, and similar means, I doubt if we would obtain novels really worth while from either an historical or an artistic point of view. How then are we to encourage novelists, or stimulate them, or inspire them, to produce real works of art rooted in or reflecting the rich opportunities of American history? I believe that we could do much to bring this about by taking effective measures to create that atmosphere of interest in and knowledge of our past which is the atmosphere out of which historical novels bloom naturally and vigorously. And I think that a great deal could be accomplished along this line by the deliberate application of modern publicity methods. I would venture to suggest that his Association establish and maintain a publicity department functioning along practical lines and doing the kind of work that is being so effectively done by another association devoted to a kindred science, that of geographical knowledge. I do not refer now to the excellent magazine run along such popular lines by the National Geographic Society, for this historical association, and many others, have their regular journals, and publish books and reports and pamphlets galore, and conduct their meetings, and conventions, and carry on their work vigorously and successfully in the universities and the schools. But the question is one of creating a wide-spread popular appreciation of at least the main aspects and chief characters of our American history. The problem is to bring about a really national consciousness of our national background, and our national traditions and legends as well as our national historical

facts. Now, the National Geographic Society, in addition to its books, its magazine, and its meetings and lectures, conducts a wide-spread and very successful publicity campaign through the newspapers. It issues from time to time a bulletin service which is not a mere report of meetings, but which is a well-written, brief account of the geographical facts concerned with some country, city, or place which has come under the limelight of the daily news. This bulletin is sent to all the newspapers of the country and a very large number of them make use of it. In this manner millions of readers who ordinarily would know nothing about the climate, soil, minerals, peoples, or resources of Bagdad or of Lapland, Mesopotamia, Jerusalem or the Balkans absorb much interesting and useful information. Why could not this Historical Association carry on a similar work? Why could not this Historical Association carry on a similar work? Why could it not send a bulletin service to the newspapers containing, in connection with some news event, such as an anniversary date, or celebration, well-written accounts of the great characters and great events of our American history? I throw this out, of course, simply as a suggestion, but I do believe that a great service could be rendered our nation by this or similar measures. Prof. Irving Fisher of Yale University once remarked to me, at a time when I was interviewing him for a New York newspaper, obtaining material for a series of articles on scientific subjects, that one of the great needs of the day was a special class of literary interpreters and distributors of scientific and scholarly knowledge. The libraries and the laboratories of the world, he said, were brimming over with the facts secured by research and experiment; but for the most part this most valuable store of knowledge did not reach the great masses of the people, or too often reached them in a distorted and misleading way. I am sure that our American people are far from possessing that loving knowledge of their country's past, and of its great figures and noble traditions and high romance, which often-times is possessed by peasants who are illiterate from a bookish point of view but who have a culture far superior to that of many others who look down upon them. Only by this general extension of knowledge and appreciation of our past can we

effectively prepare for the coming of true historical novels. Out of this atmosphere, forth from this soil of hearty, human interest in the history of our country, will then arise, spontaneously and beautifully, those masterpieces of historical narrative which are one of the best and most enduring proof of a nation's true greatness.

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